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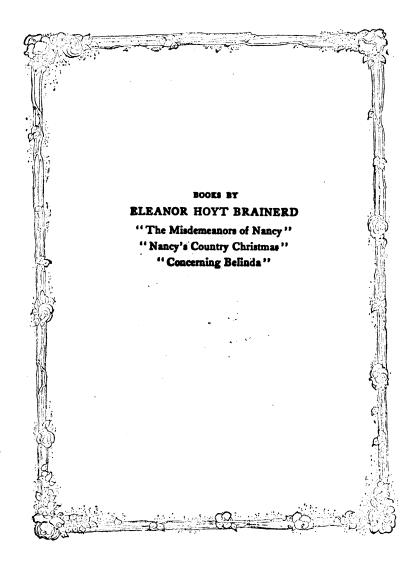


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BETTINA



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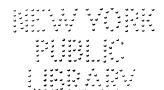
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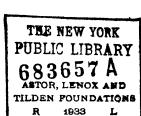
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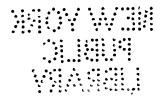
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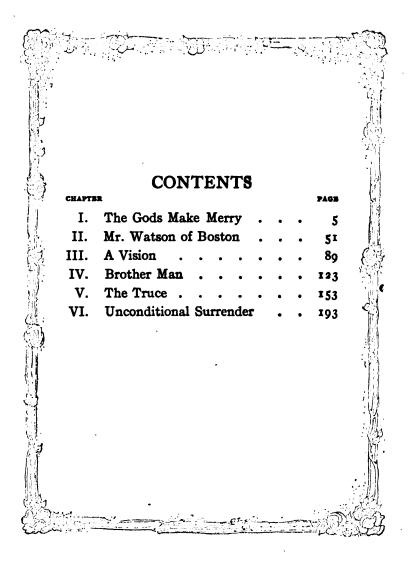


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CHAPTER I. THE GODS MAKE MERRY

CHAPTER I.

WILLOUGHBY PEYTON stood outside the ferry-house watching the Saturday afternoon crowd pouring from all directions, seething around the mouth of the narrow channel to which the swinging doors gave entrance, and disappearing in the rapids rushing madly toward the boats.

For ten years he had lived in a land where the streams of human activity were sluggish, tranquil, given to broadening into quiet pools whose outlets were hidden; and this tempestuous current fascinated him, though he set his feet widely apart and stood with a stubborn tranquillity that was a mute protest against the prevailing strenuousness. In course of time, Dick Martin would appear upon the scene. Probably he would be late like all the rest of these frenzied atomies and in quite as great a hurry. Why couldn't they all start earlier or let things at the other end of the journey wait, instead of engaging in a death grapple with time?

Dick had said it would take twenty minutes to go from the Holland House

to the ferry in a cab. Willoughby Peyton had allowed forty minutes and had told the cabman not to hurry. To be sure, he had some idle time on his hands but heratherfancied idletime and he hated scramblings. If his old friend intended taking him out to his country place for the week-end, why couldn't he come along and do it in decent, leisurely fashion? Of course. if a fellow had to hustle, why he just settled down and hustled like the devil; but how many of these people were absolutely in the grip of circumstance? How much of the hurly-burly was habit—a broad national habit?

critic settled himself solidly, more imperturbably upon his sturdy legs and smelled the carnation in his buttonhole appreciatively. As a usual thing, he didn't wear boutonniéres with his tweeds, but the little girl in the florist's shop was uncommonly jolly, and, after all, it was good to stand in the sunshine and smell a spicy carnation, while all the rest of the world was tumbling over itself before He lifted his handsome pharisaical head from the carnation to take another look at the commuters, and, as he did so, a girl in a blue frock stepped hurriedly from the platform

of a trolley-car and cast a swift, anxious glance around her. Willoughby drew a breath of satisfaction even deeper than that he had accorded to the scent of the carnation. She was lovely—undeniably lovely—and a sigh followed on the heels of the realisation that she, too, was of the strenuous ones. A fine leisure should go with such a girl, though even a snapshot impression of her had its charm. After all, there were no women like the American women. When it came to marrying, a fellow——

Just here he received a shock that disturbed his smug placidity.

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The roving brown eyes met his and the anxious wrinkle between the girl's brows disappeared in a swift smile of relief and recognition. A daintily gloved hand was waved at the amazed young man and the pretty head gave him a nod of gay understanding. Peyton involuntarily raised his hat. Then he looked over his shoulder to see for whom the greeting was actually intended. There was no one behind him, no one near him.

Evidently a mistake—but a delectable sort of mistake. He wondered who she was, where she was going, for whom she had taken him. Well, there was no harm done. Yet, even as he consoled himself with that thought, a whimsical uncertainty regarding its accuracy made a smile tug at the corners of his mouth. An unfulfilled desire was harm enough, and he wanted to know this girl in blue. She was so extraordinarily good to look at and the greeting had been so frank, the brown eyes so full of possibilities. It was a pity their acquaintance must begin and end with a wave of the hand and a smile. Dick might have known her if he had been on hand. There ought to be some way of finding out who she was.

BETTINA

Peyton's eyes, searching her in the crowd, found her again at the ticketoffice window; and, without definite purpose, but impelled by a mighty longing to see her smile at him once more, he moved through the door, to a vantage point where she would be obliged to pass him on her way to the boat. There was a flush on his face, and an odd tension of his nerves which would have surprised him if he had had time for self-analysis; but the slender figure in blue paused only for an instant at the ticket-window. Then it turned and once more Peyton saw the swift, searching glance. It passed over

the hurrying folk, rested for a fraction of a second upon the few waiting figures, then found Peyton's face. There was a repetition of the earlier phenomena that had fascinated him, only this time there was no uncertainty in the girl's face. She was quite sure of finding him and serene in an already established recognition. She smiled confidently, and, as the bewildered young man stood hypnotised by the smile, she came directly toward him, with a haste that was in tune with the scene about her.

Peyton watched her coming. There were only a few rods between them,

BETTINA

and, before he had really grasped the situation, she was at his side, still smiling frankly at him. The flush on his face deepened, his hand wandered mechanically to his hat brim. Dense confusion and helpless rapture warred in his face, but the girl was too preoccupied to notice his embarrassment.

"So glad not to miss you," she said breathlessly. "Come on. We'll have to hurry if we catch our boat. I have the tickets."

She laid her hand lightly on his arm and moved toward the wicket. Peyton went as if in a trance. He knew it was all wrong. He must assert himself, must explain, must set things right—but the touch on his arm was a compelling one, and the wave of commuters bore him onward. Once past the ticket-chopper he would call a halt and do the decent thing; but as the uniformed official returned the fifty-trip ticket, and Peyton attempted to draw his companion aside from the crowd, there was a sound of a sliding door, and the mob of commuters stampeded.

"Run!" exclaimed the girl. "He's closing the door! We've got to make that boat! There isn't another train in time for dinner. Do run!"

She set him an example, and even in his stupefaction he noticed with keen satisfaction that she ran like a young Diana instead of adopting the side-wheeler motion of the other running women—and he followed her, sprinting as nobly as in the old Yale days when the ball was in his arms, the goal before him, and the field behind.

Together they squeezed through a narrow opening. The door clanged behind them, they raced down the dock and stood breathless but triumphant upon the deck of the ferry-boat as it moved out into the river.

"We caught it!" announced Peyton,

a foolish exultation in his voice that had nothing whatever to do with the boat. His arm tingled where her hand had lain and there was a reckless exhilaration in his face. He had been abducted-forcibly abducted, and he was glad of it. Things had been taken out of his hands. He had tried to explain, but rush hour at a North River ferry is a masterful thing. So is a little gloved hand when that hand is associated with a face like the face of the girl in blue. Any fellow would have run at her invitation, provided always that he weren't asked to run away from her. Peyton was a gentleman

gentlemen go, but at the moment he was shameless. Of course, he was behaving badly, but she had said "come." It was all quite simple. With a queer little thrill he realised that it would be the same whenever she might say "come." He smiled whimsically in self-wonder, and the girl, who had been fanning herself with an absurdly small square of kerchief, met his smile and answered it.

"Ridiculous introduction, wasn't it?" she said, straightening her hat and brushing back an unruly lock of redbrown hair. "The ways of the commuters are fearsome; but you obeyed

orders like a soldier. Now, some men would have asked questions and insisted upon conventionality, and then we'd have missed the boat and dinner would have been spoiled."

Peyton had no desire to ask questions. Questions would mean answers, and answers would mean—he hugged the good moment fast and postponed the inevitable crash that would knock his new-found world into bits. "Too bad Tom had to stay late to-night, of all nights," the clear, low voice went on blithely. "Molly and I have always had our suspicions about these engagements with business men from the

West. There are so many of them, and we can't see why men from the West have such a deep-rooted aversion to doing business during regular office hours. It always takes Tom until the midnight train at least to do justice to a business man from the West. But this thing is downright reassuring. He wouldn't have missed coming out with you if he could possibly have escaped, I know."

Peyton was mute, but flatteringly attentive, and conversation lapsed for a moment while the girl looked down the river toward the sunset.

"I love it," she said softly, with a

little inclusive gesture that embraced river and sky and receding shore and far-off harbour. "I wonder whether any other folk love their town as New Yorkers do theirs."

Peyton smiled grimly. He had crossed from Southampton with a man from Chicago.

The girl resented the smile.

"Oh, yes, I suppose we are conceited about it! You probably think Boston's much better; but other men only brag about their towns and admire their towns. The New York man loves New York. The face of the city isn't so beautiful, but the big, beating

heart of it is so wonderful, and then there are the rivers and the harbour. You don't look like a Boston man!"

Beneath its European lacquer, Peyton's New York soul gave a throb of gratitude, but a chill ran down his spinal column. The abstract conversation about cities had seemed so safe and pleasant, but this rapid veering to personalities was dangerous. He must speak now while he could do it voluntarily—not allow confession to be dragged out of him. She'd be tremendously angry. Of course, she would. It was quite right that she should be angry, for he had behaved

like a cad and she'd never understand the provocation. Some girls would forgive such a thing. There were even girls who would be flattered by it, but she-no, her eyes were too uncompromisingly honest and there was stubbornness in that dainty chin. She wouldn't be egotistical enough to understand, nor tolerant enough to forgive what she couldn't understand. She'd snub him royally, and he deserved it. He might as well get it over. He braced himself, opened his mouth to speak—and was reprieved. For the girl, who had been calmly studying him since her remark exonerating him from Bostonian traits, took up the conversation where she had dropped it:

"No, you really don't look like the Boston men I've known, and you aren't exactly New York either. I wouldn't know where to place you if I hadn't heard all about you. I knew you the minute I saw you. It was awfully clever of Tom and you to arrange about the carnation. I'd have known you from Tom's description, even if you hadn't worn the flower; but it would be embarrassing for a woman to take the chances of picking out the wrong man, so I was glad when I saw the carnation.

I suppose Tom has told you a good deal about me? Perhaps you saw my picture? He had some at college, but they were taken when I was twelve, and I've changed a lot. Would you have known me?"

Here was an opportunity for truthtelling—and Peyton told the truth though not the truth that should have been told. Would he have known her? Didn't he know her for the lady of his heart the moment his eyes met hers! Could he have made a mistake when she was she and he was he!

"Oh, yes, I'd have known you anywhere," he said with enthusiastic con-

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viction. The psychological moment was past. How could he explain things now?

The boat was feeling its way into the slip and there was a restless stir in the crowd. After all, it would be awkward to make a scene on this crowded deck. Somebody would be sure to overhear, and, if she showed her surprise and resentment, as she probably would, it would excite curiosity. The waiting-room of the station would be a much better place for the awful confession. So many folk would be saying good-by there that an abrupt and stormy parting would have a fair chance of passing

unnoticed. So Peyton temporised and put off the evil moment, while the girl chatted cheerfully about Tom and Tom's wife and Tom's small boy.

There had been a ghastly moment when it had occurred to Peyton that the absent Tom might be the husband of his envoy extraordinary, but the fear had passed. Tom belonged to Molly, and the girl in blue was Tom's sister. So much was clear, but beyond all was fog.

On the way to the waiting-room Peyton's heart sank steadily lower and lower. His face took on a hang-dog expression. When they should reach the waiting-room he would tell her, and then—well, at any rate, he would have had his fifteen minutes with her. That would be something to remember, even though the fifteen minutes wound up in self-abasement and righteous, unsparing punishment.

They entered the waiting-room and Peyton cleared his throat vehemently. The reprieve was over. He must hang. Hard on a fellow to tie the noose himself!

The girl looked at him questioningly. He had halted at some distance from the crowd collected before the closed doors leading to the platform, and he was evidently swelling with some important announcement.

"Well?" she said with a little laugh. He was phenomenally serious, this quiet friend of Tom's, but she liked big, quiet men with strong chins and grave, gray eyes. Just at present the eyes were more than grave. They were positively tragic. Probably the poor fellow had forgotten his razors. Tom always forgot to pack his razors.

"Well?" she repeated mockingly.

Peyton cleared his throat again and found his voice—or, at least, a queer, choken remnant of his voice.

"I should have—" he began; but,

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before he could get further, three women kissed the girl in blue, four men shook hands with her, and a chorus of voices chanted:

"Why, Bettina!" Peyton pulled himself up with a jerk. The attacking party had fallen upon them from the rear, and the suddenness with which he was snatched from the verge of self-destruction left him gasping. The girl was introducing him.

"Edith, this is Tom's college friend, Mr. Watson—Mrs. Carpenter, Mrs. Pembroke—Mr. Watson. Miss Benton—Mr. Watson. Mr. Carpenter, Mr. Pembroke, Mr. Curtis, Mr. Alling—Mr. Watson." Willoughby groaned inwardly. The plot was thickening in appalling fashion. So he was Watson, of Boston, Tom's college friend! And who was she? Bettina! He might have known her name was Bettina. It suited her down to the ground, with its frank melody, its every-day sweetness, and its touch of womanly dignity. But Bettina what?

Verily he was paying dearly for his moment of weakness. If he had but told her at the start that he was not the man she took him for!—and yet, even now, he had hardly the grace to regret his surrender.

He couldn't own up now, before all

these friends of hers. It would put her in a wretchedly embarrassing position. There was nothing for it but to invoke the protection of his patron saint and bluff the thing through until they were all on the train. Then he would tell her, and he'd get off at the first station. Heaven grant that he could trump up some excuse for the abrupt departure that would seem plausible to these folks.

"Mr. Watson is going out for the week-end." Bettina's voice penetrated to his bewildered brain. "Tom was detained, but will be out after dinner."

How in thunder could he cut loose on the road when they all knew he was going home with her? Forgotten business—important telegram unanswered—luggage unchecked—would be out on the next train. All these excuses sounded flimsy, but one of them would have to do.

Meanwhile Mrs. Carpenter was asking him if he knew the Jersey country, and he heard himself answering in his normal voice and with his normal manner, but his heart sent up a prayer that the vivacious little woman might not prove one of the interrogatory sort, and he vowed an offering to Mercury, god of

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lies, by way of provision for probable emergencies.

A train was called and the group started toward the platform, bearing Peyton with them. He was talking cheerfully about country life—a safe, impersonal topic—but in his head the list of towns called off by the official with the stentorian voice sang itself over and over, and he wondered vaguely for which one of the towns he was supposed to be bound, and at which one of the towns he would make his exit. The girl was walking down the platform before him, with a man on each side of her, and as she swung herself

lightly to the car steps, Peyton had a glimpse of a foot and ankle that made him wander into heresy on the subject of formal gardens—a theme which appeared to be of absorbing interest to Mrs. Carpenter.

"We hired landscape gardeners of the very best reputation and they've made the place exactly like a toy Noah's Ark. Even the animals are beginning to look positively wooden just from natural adaptation to their environment, and I'm watching Mr. Carpenter anxiously. When he begins to develop angles and stiffen, we'll fly. Bettina must bring you over to sit under our prim little

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trees and look at our prim hedges and flowerbeds and walk on our prim terraces. Formal? Why, it's so formal it doesn't even speak to us. That's what comes of going to Europe and leaving your new country place to artists."

At least, she didn't ask questions. Peyton looked down at the plump, jolly woman so gratefully that a glow of self-satisfaction warmed her. Devotion to Howard Carpenter had never interfered with her enjo ment of admiration from other men, and this friend of Bettina's seemed appreciative.

On the train Peyton's hostess gra-

ciously waved him to the seat beside her, but his joy at her nearness was chilled by the thought that he must take advantage of that nearness to make his miserable explanations before the train could reach its first stoppingplace.

There were strangers in the seats immediately behind them and in front of them. There would be no excuse for his not getting the confession off his conscience this time, and, in spite of his dread, he would be glad to have the thing done. He had played the fool, and circumstances had swelled his folly to proportions positively crim-

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inal. He was in the position of an unmitigated cad, and he writhed under the ignominy of appearing in such a rôle before the girl.

The horsy young man, who had been introduced as Alling, came down the aisle, accompanied by Mrs. Carpenter, and cordially held out his hand to the man who occupied the seat in front of the criminal and his prospective judge and executioner.

"Hello, Johnson! I wonder if you'd mind exchanging seats with us. We want to sit here where we can talk to Miss Morton and Mr. Watson. Mrs. Carpenter, you know Johnson."

Mrs. Carpenter did. Mr. Johnson arose amiably and turned for a moment to speak to the girl, who introduced him to Peyton, then he meandered down the aisle.

Young Alling turned the seat over and he and his companion sat down facing a smiling girl and a sulky-eyed young man. All chance of private conversation was gone. Confession was postponed indefinitely.

Peyton drew a long breath and then laughed helplessly. The thing was on the knees of the gods—and the gods were humourists. While he lived he would live. During the next half-hour

he justified his reputation in certain European circles as an excellent dinner He talked gayly, delightfully, he told good stories, he treated Mrs. Carpenter to adroit flattery. To Miss Morton he was deferential, but only his eyes spoke compliment to her. She was rather quiet, listening with a smile to the conversation, but turning a look of surprised query upon Peyton now and then. Why had the silent man suddenly wakened to hilarity? She could not read his recklessness, so she credited the transformation to Mrs. Carpenter. Men always liked Edith. Evidently she had bored Tom's friend

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while he was alone with her. He had hardly spoken to her. A throb of resentment stirred her and there was a flash of anger in the eyes she turned to him, but he was looking at her, and she surprised in his face a something which made her turn to the window. She was still resentful, but the resentment had changed its character.

On the whole she didn't believe she had bored him—but she had a distinct suspicion that Tom's friend was a flirt, and she detested a man who attempted to flirt with every woman he met. Edith was quite welcome to Mr. Watson. The landscape outside

the window absorbed her. Peyton shot furtive glances at her, while he talked nonsense with her friend. A waving mass of red-brown hair with golden lights in it; a dainty little ear, set close to the well-shaped head; a soft line of cheek and chin. So much he could watch and be thankful for, but he wished hungrily that she would turn her face toward him again and let him see the frank brown eyes and the lips with sweetness lurking in their clear-cut lines.

Her name was Morton—Bettina Morton. He said it over and over to himself while he listened with apparent rapt attention to Mrs. Carpenter's opinion on cross-country riding. Knowing her name he could surely find out something about her—but what good would that do, since she would be mortally prejudiced against him and would undoubtedly refuse to have anything to do with him even if he should obtain a well-authenticated introduction?

"Yes. I've ridden to most of the English packs," he said in answer to Mrs. Carpenter's question. "Everybody rides over there. They'd think a fellow an awful duffer if he didn't, so, of course, I had to go in for it."

Miss Morton turned abruptly from the window.

"Why, Mr. Watson, I didn't know you had ever spent any time in England!"

A flood of scarlet rolled over Peyton's face. He had blundered, and his expression was one of conscious guilt.

"Oh—oh—yes! That is, I've been there, you know," he stammered, inwardly cursing himself, and Watson of Boston, and the humourous gods, the while.

She looked at him intently, and a touch of scorn curled the corners of her lips. Peyton read it clearly. She

thought he was lying, boasting of English experiences he had never had, in order to impress strangers. Probably Watson had never strayed out of sight of Bunker Hill Monument, and she knew it. He stared savagely at the car door, but Mrs. Carpenter, who had missed the by-play, laughed as she rose to her feet.

"Well, our paper-chases at Larchdale, then, would seem rather infantile to you. I must get my packages. They are in the other seat and the next station is ours."

She went, followed by the devoted Alling, and Peyton realised that his

moment had come. He turned abruptly to Miss Morton, who was still smiling that scornful little smile, and, gripping his courage, he made the plunge.

"Miss Morton," he said, "I've a wretched confession to make to you. You'll never forgive me. I wish you'd understand how I was tempted, but you won't. I meant to tell you on the ferry, but I waited, and then there wasn't any chance. I suppose you don't believe in falling in love at first sight?"

She had been listening with a puzzled look in her eyes. Now the look deepened to a frown, but Peyton rushed on.



"'Miss Morton,' he said, 'I've a wretched confession to make to you'"

"Nobody need know, but it can't go any further. You'll think I'm a bounder, but I've got to tell you. I'm not——"

There was a deafening crash, a splintering of glass, a sudden blow, and darkness.

The gods were still in merry mood, and consideration for Billy Peyton did not enter into their jesting.

CHAPTER II. MR. WATSON OF BOSTON

CHAPTER II.

the head-on collision between the local express and a way freight, near Larchdale, considered the accident a dull and uninteresting affair. Not even an engineer was killed, and the serious injuries were few. If a large number of socially prominent suburbanites had not been more or less shaken up and received a miscellaneous assortment of cuts and scratches, the story would hardly have been worth a place on the first page.

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To be sure, one man—a Mr. Everett Watson, of Boston—was badly hurt and was removed, in a critical condition, to the home of his friend and host, Mr. Thomas C. Morton, of Larchdale; but, though the newspaper accounts did not say this, Mr. Everett Watson, of Boston, was not of sufficient importance to justify scareheads or much space in a New York paper.

At Larchdale, however, Mr. Watson's condition had caused tremendous excitement. When Bettina Morton, dazed and frightened, regained consciousness after the accident, she found

herself wedged securely under a carseat. Slowly, cautiously she extricated her head and shoulders and sat upon a window shutter of the car, which was, as she gradually perceived, on its side in a ditch. There was considerable hysteria in the air, and, as she rubbed the rapidly swelling lump on her forehead, which seemed to be her only injury, she wondered dully whether any one was seriously hurt.

Around her all was confusion—wrenched and broken seats, shattered glass, strewn hand luggage and packages, scrambling men and women.

Near her, a man, down whose face the blood was running, was trying to lift a fainting woman through the window above him. There was shouting, screaming, hopeless disorder. No one paid the slightest attention to the quiet girl sitting motionless in the shadow between two seats, and she made no effort to move. She was not hurt, and, after a while, the excitement would be over and help would come. As her brain cleared, she remembered Tom's friend. He was trying to tell her something when the collision came. She had been provoked with him, but she couldn't remember why.

Where in the world was the man? Surely he hadn't escaped without a thought of her!

She tried to turn so that she might look about her, and, as she did so, she was conscious of a heavy weight lying across her feet. She looked down and in the semi-darkness saw the body of a man, face downward among the débris. Across the back of his head was a great gash from which the blood was streaming, and one leg was queerly doubled under him.

The girl bent forward over the limp figure, controlling with an effort her sickening horror at sight of the blood.

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She recognised the gray tweed suit and the broad shoulders, though the face was hidden, and a quick fear clutched at her heart. If he were dead——!

No; that would be too horrible. He couldn't be dead, this friend of Tom's with the boyish voice and the insistent gray eyes. Slowly, carefully, she drew her numbed feet from under the heavy body, rose to her knees, and tried to staunch the blood flowing from the wound in the back of the blond head. Her ridiculous wisp of kerchief was of no use, and she pulled the linen scarf from about her neck and folded it over the wound. Then she

looked about her helplessly, in search of aid for the man who lay so still, so horribly, terrifyingly still.

"Miss Morton! Oh, Miss Morton!"
Her heart gave a throb of relief as she heard her name called, and, looking up, saw Charlie Alling's head peering anxiously through a broken window.

"I'm here, Charlie! No, I'm not hurt, but Mr. Watson is. Some one must see to him quickly."

The boy lowered himself through the window and a brakeman followed him. Both looked white and shaken.

"Nobody really hurt so far. Thank God, you're all right, Bettina! We thought you two would get out with the rest, and then, when things quieted a bit, I missed you—and—Good heavens! He does look well done up, doesn't he?"

The brakeman had pried the broken seat away from Peyton's leg, and together the two men lifted the limp figure through the window to the trainmen waiting above.

"No, he isn't dead," young Alling said encouragingly, in answer to the question in the girl's eyes. "He's sure to pull out all right when we get a doctor. Come on, we'll have to take you out the same way. Edith and the rest will be wild until they see you.

The women were having hysterics when I left them."

Once out of the wreck and its bewildering chaos, Bettina Morton's nerves steadied and her cool common sense came back to her with a rush.

"Our carriage must be at the station. Charlie, bring it down here. Tell every body I'm all right, but too busy to be wept over."

With the carriage came a doctor—the first upon the scene. He looked Peyton over and shook his head with professional solemnity as he bandaged the unconscious man's hurts. "Compound fracture in the right leg and a

nasty head. Can't tell just how bad the trouble with the head is until we have a thorough examination."

Miss Morton listened with grave solemnity, though her lips were still white and the haunting fear lingered in her eyes.

"Thank you, Doctor—we'll be glad to have you consult with our family physician, if a consultation proves necessary. Will some of you men lift him into the carriage? Charlie, you'll come, won't you? Hold him so—there; I'll drive. Simpson, find Doctor Dawson and tell him we need him at once without a moment's delay."

She touched the restless horses with the whip and they dashed down the village street and out along the country road until they turned in at a vinecovered gateway and were drawn up before a rambling white house. A pretty, baby-faced woman rose from a lounging chair on the veranda and came forward lazily to greet the arrivals, but screamed as she saw the helpless figure in Alling's arms.

"Now, Molly, there's no time for fainting! Ring for some one to take the horses. I left Simpson at the station. The south room's ready, isn't it?"

Mrs. Morton stood mute, her big,

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childish, blue eyes wide with wonder and horror, fixed upon the bloodstained bandages about the stranger's head.

Her sister-in-law turned from her with an impatient gesture.

"Wake up, Molly! It was a railway accident. He isn't dead. Run up and—Oh, no, here's Hannah! Hannah run up and open the bed in the south room, and do what you can to help Mr. Alling, will you? John, you can help to carry Mr. Watson up to his room. I'll hold the horses until you come down. Molly, come out of your trance and telephone Tom at the club.

He was to meet a man there at fivethirty and dine with him. Tell him there has been a wreck, and Mr. Watson is badly hurt, and that he must come at once and bring a nurse with him."

She sat holding the horses in the most approved fashion, shoulders square, whip at the proper angle, reins held according to the immutable laws of horsemanship. Her hat had been left behind in the wreck; her hair, loosened from its coil, had fallen in a thick, gleaming rope that shone red gold in the sunset light. Her throat was bare; there was a ragged rent in the

shoulder of her shirtwaist; but in spite of the dishevelment, a certain unconscious dignity clung to the girl, and she held her nerves as firmly as she held the fretting team.

When Wilson, the stable-man, came down and stepped to the horses' heads, she climbed down from her high seat, walked steadily into the house and up to her room, closed the door behind her, and fainted quietly on her own bed. She was very feminine, this sister of Tom's, but there was a time and a place for all things.

Even now the collapse lasted but a moment, and before the doctor ar-

rived she was up, dressed in crisp, fresh linen, cool and calm as the May evening, and waiting in the big, cheerful room where Charlie Alling, with the assistance of Hannah, the small Tom's elderly nurse, had put the sick man to bed.

Peyton's eyes were open, but they stared without seeing and his lips muttered incoherently.

"Clean dotty," explained Alling with a sympathy of voice that gave the lie to the slangy flippancy of the words.

She nodded. Delirium was bad, but not so bad as that hideous stillness. At least, while one muttered one must be alive.

There was a brisk step on the stairs and a round, rosy little man, with keen eyes that gleamed oddly in his cherubic face, came into the room, patted Bettina on the shoulder with friendly informality, and went straight to the bedside.

"Um-m-m."

The eyes were keener than ever as the doctor turned from his first swift survey and reached for the surgical case that he had dropped upon a chair near the bed.

"Bettina, we don't need you. Send Hannah with some warm water and ice, and tell somebody to boil these instruments a few minutes and bring them up in the pan they are boiled in. Then you take half a glass of whisky and walk up and down the terrace hard minutes. twenty You knocked out, but there's no use telling you to go to bed-you wouldn't do it. I'll fix this young man up temporarily, but we'll get Remington out from the city to patch up the head. Alling, go telephone for him. Tell him I want him by the first train, and, if he balks, tell him from me to go to h—l. He'll come, but he always kicks. Going to die! Bless you, no! What are we doctors for?"

The girl obeyed orders. Doctor Dawson was generally obeyed in spite of his jolly face and genial voice. As she passed through the hall Mrs. Morton came toward her in tiptoe.

"Does the doctor think he'll die?" she asked, big-eyed, frightened as a child.

Margaret shook her head, "He says no—but he has sent for Doctor Remington."

"The big surgeon? Then he must be dreadfully hurt! Oh, dear, I wish Tom would come!"

The little woman's one idea of present help in time of trouble was her big, cheerful husband. If somebody was going to die in their house, she wanted Tom there to help her bear it—but then, of course, Tom wouldn't let the man die. Doctor Remington might be a provisional aid, but in her heart she was sure that Tom could fix things if he would only come.

"Was he nice, Bettina?"

The question sounded trivial, but Bettina was used to her sister-in-law.

"Yes. I suppose so," she said judicially.

"Did you like him?"

To the girl's own amazement the query brought a hot flush to her cheeks

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and an odd thrill to her heart; and with the flush and the thrill came the memory of a look she had surprised in certain gray eyes.

"Why, yes—yes, of course, I liked him," she said in impressively matter-of-fact tones; and, catching up a scarf from the hall table, she escaped into the out-of-door world. There was a chill in the air, and, though warmed by the doctor's prescription, she drew the scarf closely about her and walked swiftly up and down the paved terrace, the view from which was the pride and glory of Hilldale.

Below in the valley, dark shadows

were gathering, but the terrace was still flooded with the red glow from the sun, setting in splendour of rose and gold behind the far-off line of crouching purple hills. All the western side of the house, too, was bathed in rosecolour, but the girl pacing the terrace did not thrill to the sunset glow, had never a glance for the hills she loved. Under her calm exterior, her nerves were badly shaken; and, in every shadow across her path, she saw a huddled, helpless figure lying with hidden face, and a stream of blood dripping from a fair head and widening into a dark spot on the ground.

Never before, in her twenty-two years, had she come close to tragedy. Life had been kind to her. Death had held aloof from her, had laid his hand on no one near to her, and, now that she suddenly faced the grim realities, her shuddering recoil brought actual physical distress. Over and over she reminded herself that the man who lay in the south room was a mere stranger, but the assurance brought no relief to the aching tightness in her throat, the shrinking horror in her heart. He had been so big and strong and full of life. It was horrible to think that he might die-that death might come like that

in an instant, blotting out the good world, laying a cold hand on a warm heart, stilling a gay voice.

He had had a nice voice, this man who might die to-night. She had liked it the moment he first spoke to her, had noticed the musical, vibrant quality in the tone. It was a voice to remember, a voice in which an impulsive urgency was oddly met with a lazy nonchalance. To be sure, he had not talked much to her, but she had listened while he talked to Edith. It had occurred to her that his voice was like his eyes. The boy and the man of the world were in both.

There had been something singularly boyish about him at first. She had almost thought him embarrassed, but he had seemed exceedingly at his ease with Edith and Charlie. And then the queer, nervous diffidence had come back to him when he was left alone with her just before the accident. He had wanted to tell her something, too; had appeared absurdly in earnest about it. What in the world could he have had to tell her? Nothing important enough to have embarrassed him, surely.

The shadows crept up the hill and drove the afterglow from the terrace,

but still the girl walked up and down swiftly, nervously, stopping only when the doctor's form appeared in the low French window of the library.

"Are you out there, Bettina?" he called, peering uncertainly into the gloom.

She came forward, and the light from the window fell upon her white, tense face.

Doctor Dawson gave the little grunt of disapproval which was his concession to femininity. If he had been dealing with man, the grunt would probably have been an oath. There were many folk in the country around Hilldale for whom the doctor's profanity and brusquerie quite obscured his skill and kindliness, who shook their heads dismally when his name was mentioned, and, with uplifted brows, whispered stories of his deplorable rudeness and godlessness; but none of the Hilldale poor were among the critics. Every child in the country was his friend, every dog along the country roads knew the doctor's old buckboard and pacing sorrel, and wagged a joyous tail when they hove in sight. When the great surgeons came out to the little town, they met the doctor as an equal, and even Death seemed to have

a wholesome respect for the little man who had so often worsted him in handto-hand conflict. The doctor's vocabulary was rich and unconventional. Even his best friends couldn't deny that; but, as Jim Bowers, the hotelkeeper, remarked after Doctor Dawson pulled him through a sharp attack of pneumonia:

"Doc can swear rich and racy, I will say that. He cussed that pneumonia right out of me, but he had his coat and collar off and was workin' all right, too. Bless you, the cussing weren't personal! You see, Doc gets up such a head of steam when he settles

down to work that he's just naturally got to let it off some way or bust all over the place. Swearing's his safetyvalve."

The doctor made a laudable effort not to swear before women folk. Nothing short of acute and dangerous illness led him to overstep the rule, and the women who had been sick enough to hear him swear were seldom the ones who resorted to the gentlemanly homoeopath on Valley Road. They thought too much of him, by the time he had dragged them out of the valley of the shadow, to be affected by his peculiarities.

Bettina Morton had known him all her life, and she read his emphatic grunt aright.

"Yes?" she said, smiling into the frowning, yet friendly, face.

"I said twenty minutes. Didn't intend you should go in for a century run. Did you eat any dinner?"

"No, I didn't want anything."
The second grunt was eloquent.

"All women are fools—so are most men. It'll help me out wonderfully to have you sick on our hands, won't it? You go in and eat something hot and sensible, and then go up and let Alling get away. I left him in charge, and he hasn't had any dinner."

Bettina's face was flooded with contrition.

"Oh, the poor fellow! I didn't think." She brushed hastily past the doctor, but he caught her arm.

"Poor nothing! It won't hurt the boy to be useful once in a way. You are to eat something before you go up to relieve him. I'll be back before Remington comes. Got a pretty sick boy down on Locust Street and I want to fix him up for the night. Don't ring. I'll go out to the stable for Dolly."

He turned off into the twilight, and Bettina, after succeeding in swallowing a cup of bouillon, went up to the room where the night-lamp burned.

"You must go down and have some dinner, Charlie, and then go home," she said softly. "I can't tell you how grateful we are to you."

The young fellow stood hesitating beside the bed.

"I don't like to leave you here alone before Tom comes."

"Oh, that's all right! The servants are here, and the doctor will be back soon, and I think Tom will come on the eight-thirty. He isn't so restless,

is he?" She turned a wide-eyed, fascinated gaze upon the bandaged head upon the pillow.

"No—mutters a little sometimes, that's all. The doctor gave him something to quiet him, I think. The icebags have to be kept filled—and, if he should get to tossing a bit, he's to have a teaspoonful of this stuff in the tumbler. I'll go down and feed, for I'm hollow as a drum—but I won't leave the house."

He left her sitting in the high-backed chair beside the bed—for the first time in her life alone with one who was dangerously ill—and she had scarcely stirred in her place when, twenty minutes later, she heard the roll of wheels on the drive.

"Tom!" she thought, with a sigh of relief and an involuntary relaxing of tense nerves and muscles. Tom's sister did not share his wife's belief in his omnipotence, but she was used to turning to him in emergencies, and she would be so glad to shift the responsibility to his broad shoulders.

Quick steps came up the stairs and down the hall. The girl rose noiselessly, went to the door, opened it, and for a fraction of a second put her hand down on the shoulder of the big man

whose genial, boyish face was sobered by alarm and anxiety.

He slipped his arm around her and patted her awkwardly on the back with a big hand.

"Rough on you, Bettina," he whispered, "but brace up. How is he?"

She was standing straight and selfreliant again as they moved toward the bed, and in a low voice she told him how things stood.

"Poor duffer!" murmured Tom, honest grief under the inadequate words. "Poor duffer!"

Bettina took the little night-lamp from the table and held it so it lighted



"'Where's Watson?' he asked. 'That's not Watson!'"

the sick man's face as her brother bent over the bed.

Tom looked down pityingly, started, leaned nearer the pillow and stared with dilating eyes and mouth puckering slowly as though for a long whistle. Then suddenly he straightened up, beckoned to his sister and made hastily for the door, swelling visibly with suppressed excitement. Wondering, puzzled by his behaviour, Bettina put down the lamp and followed him to the hall, closing the door behind her.

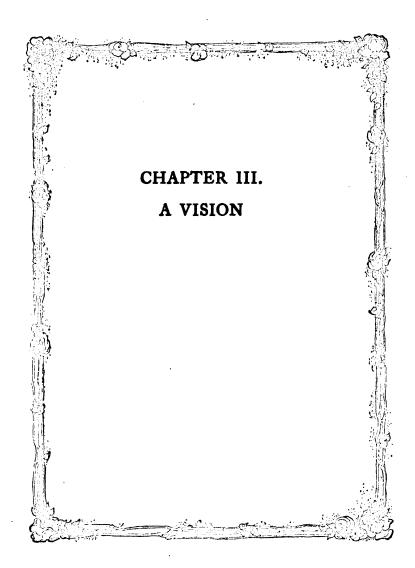
Tom was standing with his hands in his pockets and bewilderment in every line of his face.

"For Heaven's sake, Betty," he said, in low, excited tones, "who's that man?"

She stared at him blankly. Had he taken leave of his senses?

"Why, Tom——" she began, but he interrupted her.

"Where's Watson?" he asked.
"That's not Watson!"



CHAPTER III.

FOR a moment the brother and sister looked at each other silently. Bettina was the first to find her voice, and she used it for a futile purpose.

"Why, of course it's Mr. Watson," she protested feebly.

"Do you suppose I don't know Watson?"

"B-but he met me at the ferry."

Amazement gave way to anger in Tom's face.

"Did the fellow come up and tell

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you he was Watson?" His fist closed suggestively.

A wave of memory swept through the girl's bewildered brain.

"Well—n-no," she stammered, reddening. "He was just standing there, but he was waiting for somebody, and he had a carnation in his buttonhole, and——"

A faint glint of humour appeared in the man's angry face, but was promptly snuffed out by fresh resentment.

"You spoke to him and he was cad enough to take advantage of your mistake, I suppose."

She was struggling in the grip of an

overwhelming embarrassment, but she was honest.

"Well, you see, he didn't have much chance. It was time for the train-boat and I couldn't wait for formalities, and so I just took his arm and told him to run—and he ran."

The glint of humour reappeared, spread, died hard this time.

"Oh!"

Betty resented the tone, but when she lifted her eyes from the rug and looked suspiciously at her brother's face it was appropriately sober.

"Didn't he say anything about the mistake on the boat."

"No—no. He didn't say anything at all except 'yes' and 'no.' I talked all the time, and there was such a crowd right around us and——"

"And nothing came up to rouse a suspicion, all the way out here?"

She shook her head.

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"You see, we met some people from here in the waiting-room, and I introduced him to them, and they sat with us and——"

The glint of humour asserted itself once more, persisted, spread into a slow, broad grin; but Betty's eyes were on the rug.

"He did start to say something to me

just as we went into the waiting-room, but then Edith and the rest turned up. And just before we got to Larchdale, Edith and Charlie went away—and he said he had a confession to make—but then the train ran into us—and——"

She looked up and saw Tom's grin.

"You think it's funny!" she continued, her eyes smarting with angry tears. "If my sister had been insulted I would n't look at it that way; but, of course, ideas differ."

Tom tried to suppress his smile.

"But you were just now apologising for the fellow, Betty."

"Apologising for him!" she flashed, with feminine unreason. "Nobody could apologise for him! He's a hateful wretch! No man with a single spark of decency in him would have done such a thing."

The masculine propensity for condoning the failings of fellowman came to the front: "Oh, come now, Betty. It is n't so bad as that. Of course, he ought n't to have let things slide, but when a pretty girl tells a fellow to run—with her—why, if he has the spirit of a mouse, he runs!"

She was too angry to speak.

"And he didn't have a chance after

the first shock, you say?" Tom went on soothingly.

Then his sense of humour got the better of his discretion altogether, and he gave vent to a subdued chuckle.

"By Jove, it's kidnapping, Betty—nothing short of kidnapping! If he chooses to prosecute, you'll—"

He relented at the sight of two large tears trickling down her hot, flushed cheeks. Betty seldom cried. Even now she was crying only from sheer rage and exasperation.

"What in the world will people think?"
Tom grew serious.

"Nobody need know."

BETTINA '

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"But I introduced him as Mr. Watson."

"We'll simply tell them they misunderstood. Bluff hard enough about a thing of that kind and the bluff always goes. I'll find out this fellow's real name, and adopt him as a long-lost college chum—then I'll sidetrack the real Watson when he turns up—and there you are!"

She looked slightly relieved, but still doubtful and distinctly bad-tempered.

"And we'll have to have the horrid thing here in the house."

The man's good-natured face hardened into stern disapproval.

"See here, Betty, the fellow's sick—dying, perhaps. I'd cut that sort of thing out if I were you. He's paying dear for a few minutes of foolishness, and, when the Lord puts His hands on a man, it's up to us to take ours off. Of course, it's embarrassing all around, but nobody outside need know, and we'll just have to settle down and pull him through—after all, it'll be harder on him, anyway it comes out, than on anybody else. Heisn't in an enviable position—and he looks like a gentleman."

"Gentleman!"

Bettina's chin was in the air.

Tom opened the sick-room door.

"He ought n't to be alone. Is there anything to be done for him?"

She explained.

"Didn't you bring a nurse?" she added reproachfully.

"Could n't find one in a hurry. They promised to send one out to-morrow."

Tom went into the room and shut the door, and as his sister went down the hall she met Doctor Dawson, accompanied by a tall man with a weary, distinguished face.

"Oh, Bettina, this is Doctor Remington—Miss Morton, Doctor. Everything quiet?"

- "Yes. Tom's there."
- "That's good. Nurse with him?"
- "No, we can't get one till to-morrow."
- "Tut-tut—too bad. Well, we'll get along. Tom will have to help us. Run along and cheer Mrs. Morton up. She looks as if she had lost all her friends and relatives."

They passed on into the sick-room, where Morton hastily and with a guilty air hung the coat of the patient upon the hook from which he had taken it, and came forward to greet the surgeons, slipping a wallet and a little square of white cardboard into his pocket as he crossed the room.

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"Bad business, this," he said gravely, after the first words of greeting.

Doctor Remington was already handling the bandages, but the other doctor nodded.

"Pretty bad."

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"What do you think of Peyton's chances?"

The doctor looked surprised.

"Watson, you mean?"

Mr. Morton elevated his eyebrows.

"Why, no; Peyton-my friend here."

"Bless my soul! Bettina surely said Watson."

"Oh, no, you did n't understand her: This is my old friend Willoughby Peyton. You must pull him through, Doctor."

When Tom returned from driving Doctor Remington to the eleven o'clock train, his sister and wife came out of the latter's room to meet him.

"They say he has a fighting chance now," Morton announced, in answer to the question in their eyes. "Dawson's going to stay all night with me, so go to bed. You can't do anything. Sorry I laughed, Bettina. It'll be all right. You'd better let me explain to Molly."

Bettina Morton lay awake longer than usual that night. Over and over she reviewed the comedy—with its

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tragic ending—no; the ending had not yet been reached: the final curtain might be tragic indeed. Hurt pride, wounded dignity, mortification, anger seethed in her soul; but once or twice she smiled in the darkness.

No one with a sense of humour could deny that the episode had its amusing features. Of course one could not but detest the man. His conduct had been inexcusable, absolutely inexcusable—but common-sense whispered that, looked at from a vantage-point of future years, the whole thing might seem more funny than serious—unless—no; he would surely get well. She would n't

admit the possibility of the man's dying.

And then, quite unexpectedly, there flitted through her mind the thought that it would have been nice if the creature had been Mr. Watson. A convalescent with such eyes and such a voice might have been—but, as it was, of course she hated him. He had n't the faintest instincts of a gentleman.

Doctor Dawson was at breakfast the next morning when Bettina came in her hands full of pink and white and purple hyacinths, her shining hair wind-tossed, her face glowing. He looked up appreciatively.

"No use asking whether you slept," he said. "Had your breakfast?"

"An hour ago."

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"Really? Why so matinal?"

"It's a sin to sleep, these spring mornings, when all the world's lilting."

She didn't mention that she had been too anxious for news of the man who was not Watson, and she didn't ask the questions that the doctor might naturally have expected, but, apparently, he did not notice the omission.

"Well, Peyton's getting along as well as we could expect," he said between mouthfuls.

She started.



"'No use asking whether you slept,' he said'"

"Funny thing," the doctor went on.
"I could have sworn you said the man's name was Watson."

Bettina entered a quick protest.

"Oh, no; I could n't have done that."

"I suppose not, though people do make such slips sometimes when they are excited. Well, anyway, his name does n't affect his head or his leg. The leg will come along all right, but it will be some time before we can call that head out of the woods. Too bad for you folks to be saddled with such an illness. Tom and I took turns sleeping last night, but I suppose the nurse will

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turn up to-day. Then you and she can handle things. I'll be in and out often, and Tom will come out early every afternoon. Of course, Mrs. Morton doesn't count. She will be a joy to the invalid when he's convalescent, but she is n't of the stuff of which sick nurses are made."

Bettina was absorbed in putting her hyacinths into various brass and pottery bowls, and even the old doctor felt the charm of her as he eyed her across his coffee-cup. She was so freshly, graciously feminine, and yet so vigorously alert. There was coquetry in every fold of the white

morning frock, in the dainty slippers peeping out from under the short skirt, in the effectively careless sweep of waving hair across the low brow—and yet there was a direct frankness in the clear brown eyes, a decision in the clean-cut features, a buoyant strength in the lithe figure, that set the girl apart from all langourous and helpless woman things.

The doctor viewed her with evident satisfaction. He had assisted at her entrance into the world and had always felt that the world in general was indebted to him for the service.

"Do you know, Bettina," he said,

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"there was a mighty nice boy spoiled in you?"

She smiled at him across the huge bowl of hyacinths she was carrying to the teatable, and he added quickly:

"And yet petticoats seem to suit you particularly well, too, and it'd be a pity to crop that mane. No; on the whole, you'll do very well as a girl—and a wife for some good fellow. This Peyton looks like a good sort. Has he any money?"

The abrupt change in subject was bridged over by a thought unspoken but as intelligible to the girl as to the doctor. She stiffened as she rose from setting the flowers upon the low table.

"I don't know anything about him and I'm not interested in knowing anything," she answered loftily—and the doctor whistled as he watched her back vanishing through the door.

"Whew!" he muttered, with a twinkle in his eyes. "She isn't usually so touchy. The chap must have made some running before he got smashed up."

The morning trains came and went but brought no nurse, and vigorous use of the telephone produced no results beyond a promise of a nurse on

the morrow. At noon Tom Morton came into the library where his sister sat tucked up on a window-seat with a volume of poetry open on her knee, but with eyes gazing idly at the cloud of pink and white apple blossom outside the window.

"Think of trying to capture it with the alphabet!" she said, looking at him for a fleeting second, then going back to the May world.

The man looked down at her, ignoring the invitation to poetry.

"Bettina, I 've got to go to town."
She whirled around suddenly.

"There are things at the office," he

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went on, "that have to be attended to and that nobody can do except me—and Stevens is on from San Francisco to wind up a business deal with me. I hoped the nurse would be here before I left, but she is n't and you'll have to take charge of things. Now, do n't be an idiot, Betty."

His tone was masterful, for there was consternation and mutiny in her face.

"Tom, I can't."

"You'll have to. He won't know you—does n't know anybody. I'm sorry to leave the thing to you, but I've got to go, and Dawson said he'd be here every hour or two. There's noth-

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ing to do but give him medicine and watch his temperature, but it would n't be right to trust one of the servants. You could telephone for the doctor any minute. He left word just where he'd be when he is n't here. Come along. I'll show you about things."

She followed him meekly. When Tom said a thing was to be done, it was done. He seldom asserted himself, but he was master in his house, and even his much-indulged sister recognised the fact. An hour later she was sitting once more in the quiet south room, but not close beside the bed as she had sat the night before.

She had moved a low wicker chair across the room to the window which was shaded by Venetian blinds, but wide open. Flickering rays of sunlight and gleams of blue sky came through. Below the window she could see a drift of fruit blossom, and gusts of perfume were borne in to her on the soft sun-warmed air, to mix with the odour of drugs and disinfectants that was an insistent reminder of the still form under the bedelothes and of the bandaged head ghastly against the white pillow.

There was no medicine to be given for another half-hour, and the girl

closed her eyes, leaned close to the open window, and tried to forget the indoor hideousness in the out-of-door-beauty: but the spell of the springtime was broken, and the dreams that down on the library window-sill had drifted through her brain refused to come at her bidding. If one stole out of the heart of the spring to her, it lingered but an instant. The faintest stir in the bed, a whiff of iodoform, and the delicate thing was gone, leaving the wouldbe dreamer alone with grimmer companions, with thoughts of suffering. disease and death, with sickening realisation of the pain and sorrow

throughout the sunlit spring world. It was horrible that men must suffer and be unhappy and die when the fruit trees were abloom and the world was so young and care-free and blithe.

Doctor Dawson came and went, the afternoon hours dragged slowly by, and the girl in the white frock sat by the window with shadows in her eyes and with folded hands, save when she crossed noiselessly to the bedside to carry out the doctor's orders. Gradually the air that came in through the open window lost its warmth and the flickering sunshine ceased playing

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pranks upon the floor of the sick-room, but the blossom scents came up more insistently, more heavily. Bettina's eyes were shut, her head leaned listlessly against the cushioned chair. Tom would come soon and she would go off over the hills in the sunset and forget all the disagreeable things if she could. To-morrow—well, to-morrow the nurse would arrive.

Something stirred her like a call. She opened her eyes quickly, sat up straight in her chair, intent, listening. There was no sound, but as her eyes travelled to the bed they met the gaze of other eyes—wondering, puzzled eyes

with an incredulous gladness in them, and she caught her breath sharply.

The patient was conscious, sane, though his sick brain was struggling vainly to remember, to understand. Only the gladness was positive, a live thing in the eyes that looked preternaturally big and dark and uncanny in the white face.

Peyton did not move. He only looked; but the look brought the girl to her feet, embarrassed, hesitating, uncertain. The woman in her made her forget the man's offence and think only of his weakness, his need.

She crossed the room softly and

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leaned over him. His eyes still held hers. The glad incredulity grew to something approaching awe. He did not quite believe in her or in his surroundings, and she saw it in his face.

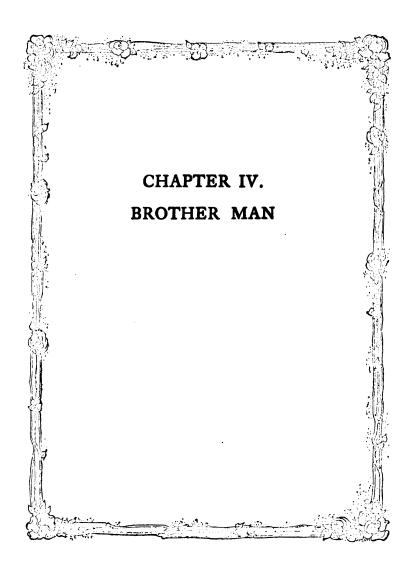
"You have been hurt," she said in low, quiet tones. "You must n't try to talk. Everything will be all right."

He listened, the puzzled frown between his brows deepening. Then, suddenly, it gave way to the gladness. He did not understand—but she was there! He was too tired to think, but he smiled, and his eyes closed as Tom entered the room and came to his sister's side. She shook her head in warning, but Peyton lay quite still. The flicker of consciousness had lasted only for the moment, but the smile of content lingered on his lips.

"Poor chap," whispered Tom.

"Poor old chap! Looks like a boy,
doesn't he? The nurse is downstairs,
Bettina. Run down and arrange about
things for her."

The girl slipped out of the room, a great relief in her face, but as she closed the door she sent a last glance toward the sick man. He was still smiling, boyishly, and, for some reason, Bettina blushed.



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CHAPTER IV.

MISS KIRBY was a capable nurse but she was not beautiful. On the contrary, she was plain—to the point of elaboration.

Bettina and Molly sighed that so delectable a uniform should be wasted upon a woman incapable of doing it justice; Tom promptly dubbed the homely, muscular woman the houri; but Doctor Dawson, coming from his first interview with his new aide, was enthusiastic.

"Splendid woman—horse sense, strength, and good training. Ugly?

Lord, yes, but this is no beauty-show. That woman will pull the lad through."

Within a few days the entire house-hold came around to the doctor's opinion. Outside of the sick-room the nurse was quiet, tactful, self-effacing. In the sick-room she was a marvel of efficiency. When she rested, Hannah was left by the bedside with orders to call her if any need arose. She took her regular exercise on the terrace, within sight of the south room windows. She was vigilant, alert, untiring, serene, and, to Bettina's intense relief, she firmly declined all assistance from that young woman.

"The fewer the persons who enter a sick-room, the better," she said, with the smile that was her one beauty and that robbed her curtness of all offence.

So doctor and nurse fought the battle with Hannah as humble auxiliary and Peyton, raving in his fever, talked of fox hounds and German baths and brown eyes and other miscellanies. There was much incoherent talk, too, about some confession that must be made, and occasionally he pleaded with Miss Kirby to try to understand and to forgive him.

"Something worrying him before

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the smash-up," commented the doctor after hearing one of the impassioned pleas. "Woman, of course. Set any man, from Jimmy Peters down at the stables to the Archbishop of Canterbury, talking in delirium, and it's dollars to doughnuts he'll rave about some woman. If it isn't his own wife or sweetheart it's somebody else's wife or sweetheart. This woman had brown eyes at any rate. He's very particular about that, is n't he? It might be a good thing to have her here—and then again it might not. They do n't always have a soothing, angelic influence outside of books—those loved ones,

the whole, I guess you're a safer soother than the brown-eyed siren, Miss Kirby."

She smiled, but said nothing. Saying nothing was one of her accomplishments. If she had collected other details in addition to the item of brown eyes, had heard astonishing things about red-gold hair and a low, broad forehead, and firm, red lips betrayed by a dimple near their right-hand corner, and if—being as observing as she was quiet—she had studied Bettina Morton's face with considerable interest and drawn radical conclusions from that study, she was not the woman to

mention these side-issues. She was there to nurse a patient.

Yet sometimes when Peyton, holding fast to her hand, assured her that there was no woman like her, that he had lost his heart to her the moment his eyes saw her, and that she must forgive him for the love's sake, the homely woman's face softened to a sympathy that actually approached beauty, and she sighed. If Miss Morton was the girl of the brown eyes, thought the nurse, the romance must be lamentably one-sided, for that browneyed young woman never approached the sick-room, asked about the patient

only in a most perfunctory manner, was, to all appearances, profoundly indifferent to the south-room drama, save as humanity impelled her to wish a safe recovery to any stranger within her brother's gates.

One day in early June, Willoughby Peyton opened his eyes and looked dully at the unfamiliar footboard of the four-poster bed; studied, with an effort at intentness, the pattern of the wall paper; examined, with languid curiosity, the etching that hung where he could see it without moving. Slowly his befogged brain cleared and the unaccustomed surroundings brought a

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faint surprise, though memory was not yet stirring. Why was he in a room he did not know, and why was he so disinclined to move even his eyelids, and what the deuce was that thing around his head, and why did his right leg feel-? Oh, yes, there had been an accident! His brain laboured and brought forth another memory. He turned his head feebly on the pillow and, with a dawning hope in his eyes, he looked toward the window. As his gaze fell upon the crisp whiteness of petticoats, falling around the rockers of the low wicker chair, the hope became certainty. For an instant he

closed his eyes, putting off the good moment, saving it. Then he looked again, but his glance travelled up from the crisp petticoats to a large waist, square shoulders, a swarthy, homely face, and as he stared at the strange features, a sharp exclamation of disappointment escaped from his lips.

The woman in the chair rose quickly and came toward him, alarm changing to pleasure in her face as she met his look and read the sanity in it. The disappointment she noticed but did not understand. Coming back into the actualities after the raging of brain fever always affected sick folk oddly.

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"I'm Miss Kirby, the nurse," she said. "You'd better not try to talk."

"Where am I?" he asked, and his voice sounded so small and far away that he smiled at the silly little thing.

"You're in Mr. Morton's home, where you were brought after the accident," said the nurse, her fingers on his pulse. "You've been very ill, but you are coming around all right now. And you really must not talk any more until the doctor comes."

She tucked a clinical thermometer into his mouth by way of enforcing the

mandate, and he lay silently looking at her, but as she took the thermometer out and examined it, he asked another question:

"Has any one else been in the room—over there in the chair?"

She shook her head.

" No."

The disappointment deepened in his face. So she had n't been with him after all, she had n't looked down at him and spoken kindly! It had all been a part of the fever. The keen interest faded out of his eyes and he made no further effort to talk, but lay patching together memories, guessing, wonder-

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ing, until the doctor came briskly into the room a few hours later.

"Why, bless my soul!" exclaimed the little man, as he saw the patient's look and Miss Kirby's smile. "What's all this? This is something like, eh, Kirby? How d' you feel, my boy?"

"More or less like Judgment Day with my bones badly sorted."

Doctor Dawson grinned.

"No, this is the same old world, though you tried hard enough to get out of it—and we flatter ourselves we've done a pretty good job of bonesorting, don't we, Miss Kirby? Now you keep quiet, old man, and in a few

days you can talk a blue streak if you want to. Do n't think and worry. Just let things slide."

"I want to see Mr. Morton."
The doctor shook his head.

"But I've got to see him right away!"
There was urgency, excitement, in
the tones, and the doctor looked disturbed and spoke soothingly.

"Well, we'll see about it to-morrow. It won't do to-night, but if you keep quiet and don't get excited and sleep to-night, maybe we can fixit to-morrow. Tom will be mighty glad to see you. He's been worrying about you in a way that was n't flattering to me.

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Miss Kirby, no excitement for this boy to-night and no more talking."

He went out, whistling under his breath, as was his fashion when he was pleased, and met Bettina Morton on the stairs.

"Our patient's rational at last," he said, with a great satisfaction in his tones, the satisfaction of one who has fought a hard fight and won. "He is n't out of the woods yet, but we've got the fever under and he's through the darkest woods, unless something unexpected turns up. By next week you can go in and cheer him up a bit."

He went down the stairs and Bettina

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hurried to her own room, where she dropped into a big chair with a little catch in her breath and a flutter in her heart.

Of course, she was glad Mr. Peyton was so much better. She admitted that. He was a human being even if he was horrid, and one mustn't allow one's dislikes to make one unnaturally hard-hearted. As for cheering him up, wild horses couldn't drag her to the creature's room, but—probably she'd have to see him before he left the house. She couldn't very well go away to escape him, and one couldn't but be civil in one's own house. She would

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treat him decently, of course, but avoid him as much as possible.

The sick man's desire to see Tom Morton was so fixed, so strenuous, that the next day, when Tom came from the city, the doctor told him to go up and see his friend.

"He wants to see you alone," said Doctor Dawson, "and I think he wants to tell you something that's worrying him—wants to get it off his mind. He'll fret his temperature up if I don't let him see you, but you must be careful. Don't let him get excited. Satisfy his mind if you have to lie like smoke to do it. The Recording Angel

can charge it up to me. Mercury's the god of doctors as well as of inn-keepers. Run along, boy, but keep your wits about you."

Miss Kirby left the sick-room as Tom Morton entered it, and there was an embarrassing moment for both men, as the visitor walked toward the bed; but Tom's genial voice broke the silence.

"Well, Peyton, how goes it?"

The sick man looked at him gratefully.

"Know who I am, I see," he said in his weak, languid voice.

Tom nodded cheerfully.

"Went through your clothes and found some cards. Nobody knows any thing about the misunderstanding except Betty and my wife and me. They all think you're an old college friend of mine. Tough luck to get knocked out this way, wasn't it?"

Peyton was struggling for words.

"I owe you an apology," he said at last. "It was beastly of me, but I honestly didn't intend the thing should go so far. Your sister took me by surprise—and I didn't stop to think—and—and she was so beautiful!" he wound up lamely with a propitiatory look at the big man beside him.

A broad, spreading grin illumined the face of Bettina's reprehensible brother.

"Just that," he said with a chuckle.

"Don't worry, old man! What could a fellow do when a pretty girl insisted on running away with him?"

Peyton was relieved, but still abjectly contrite.

"I thought I'd tell her on the boat, but there was such a crowd right around us, and then in the station we met all those friends of hers, and—Say, wasn't I in an awful hole, and isn't it the worst sort of luck for me to be flung on your charity this way and to

have to impose on you as I am imposing on you? It's enough to make a fellow turn his face to the wall and die!"

Tom laughed, a jolly, friendly laugh that warmed the cockles of the sick man's heart.

"Rot!" he said simply and conclusively. "Don't you bother your head about all that. We're glad to have you here and delighted to do all we can for you. We had Remington up, and Dawson's good, and you've got a corking fine nurse. Is there any one you'd like to have come—any one you want me to telegraph to?"

Peyton thought for a moment; then shook his head.

"No; I haven't any near relatives, and most of my friends are on the other side of the water. Even Parker's over there. He's my valet, and I rather fancy he's my best friend. I'll cable for Parker a little later. You see, ever since I left Yale I've been looking after my uncle. Rum old chap, Uncle Willoughby was, but he wasn't so bad as his temper and his liver. Dad died before I got through college, and there wasn't anybody here belonging to me. Uncle Willoughby was all alone, too—living abroad, in England

mostly, but trotting around from one liver-cure to another. He sent for me and I went over for a few monthsthought I wouldn't stay a week when I first met my relative, but he got worse and needed me. Then we grew fond of each other after a queer fashion, and I stuck by him and let him do half his swearing at me, so his valet—that's Parker—could have a chance to breathe. We took care of the old gentleman, Parker and I, but it was n't the sort of thing I'd mapped out for myself, and I couldn't have kept it up if it hadn't been for the confounded loneliness and helplessness of the cantankerous old fellow. He died in March and left me a pot of money, and I made for New York. But you see, ten years has wiped me out of the memories of my old friends here. There's Dick Martin. I'd like to send word to Dick at the Knickerbocker Club. I was on my way to spend Sunday with Dick when I—digressed."

"Yes, that's better. If you'd let Coates know about me—he's my lawyer over here, and he'd send some one out to arrange about business matters. Awfully good of you to have been my banker so far, Mr. Morton."

"Transgressed," corrected Tom.

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"Better make it Tom. That'll suit the old college proposition better. Don't worry; I'll see to everything."

Peyton lay still. The exertion of talking, even for a few minutes, had left him weak and white.

"Your—your sister," he said, with an effort caused as much by embarrassment as by fatigue. "They tell me she was n't hurt."

"Oh, no, Bettina's all right!"

"She's—I suppose—of course, she's angry with me—thinks I'm a bounder."

Peyton's anxious face pleaded for reassurance, and Tom, remembering the doctor's admonition, lied stoutly. "Bettina? Oh, no, Bettina is n't that kind. Of course, she did n't like it at first, but she's not angry now—don't get that idea in your head."

A look of intense relief overspread the thin, white face.

"You're all awfully good," Peyton murmured weakly but gratefully, and Miss Kirby, coming in, shooed Tom out of the room.

The convalescence progressed tediously, but Peyton was, for a man, fairly patient and amenable. Tom dropped into the sick-room every day and stayed until put out. Pretty, inconsequent Molly donned her fluffiest

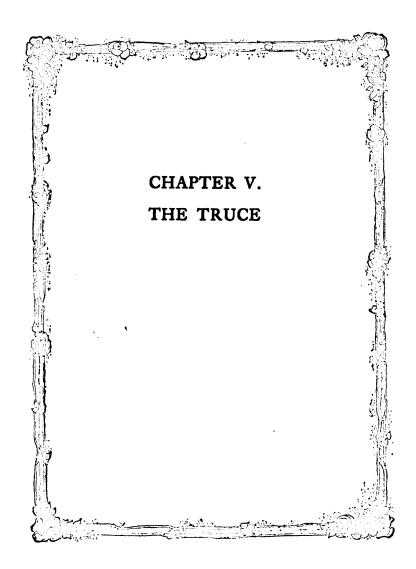
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and daintiest summer frocks for the invalid's benefit, and petted him, humoured him, cooed over him in a fashion which—taken in conjunction with a Southern voice, a lovely face, and a cerchildlike irresponsibility—was tain eminently agreeable to the invalid, but which moved Miss Kirby to something between wonder and contempt. Life had been a serious matter for Miss Kirby. She did not understand the lilies of the field. It is only the beautiful woman who can, if she chooses, leave responsibility to the rest of the world, sure that the rest of the world will humbly adjust its shoulders to the

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burden. Each day Charlie Alling drifted in to see the sick man, in whom he felt a proprietary interest; Doctor Dawson called more often than professional concern demanded.

But Betty Morton went her way serenely, and her way did not lead her to the sunny south room.



CHAPTER V.

A FTER a time Peyton lost his waiting look and stopped colouring vividly whenever there was a step in the hall or the handle of the door was turned, but he still listened intently when voices sounded through the house or floated up from the terrace, and a wistful look haunted his eyes.

One morning a child's high treble shrilled up from the lawn, and Peyton looked inquiringly at his nurse.

"Tommy came home yesterday," she said in answer. "He has been

making his yearly visit to his grandparents. Nice little fellow."

Later in the morning, when Miss Kirby had gone downstairs to see about her patient's luncheon, leaving him alone, the door into the hall opened slowly, and Peyton, turning to greet the comer, saw a chubby boy in a Russian suit of white linen, gazing solemnly at him.

"Hello, little man!"

The small boy stared unwinkingly.

"I'm Thomas Fwanklin Morton, Junior," he announced with impressive gravity.

"Thomas Franklin Morton, Junior,

come in. I'm Willoughby Prentiss Peyton, at your service," said the invalid with equal formality, but with smiling eyes.

"May I see your bwoke leg?"

"You may," promised Peyton promptly.

Thomas Franklin Morton, Junior, moved sedately to the bedside, but there was delight in his round, ruddy face.

"They said I could n't. Aunt Bettina said I must n't even ask. I said I was sure you'd like to show it to me."

"Well, it's all done up in splints and bandages, you know!"

The youngster was visibly disappointed.

"Can't you see where it's bwoke off?"

"No, I haven't even seen it myself." Thomas was sympathetic.

"What's the fun of having it, then?" he asked pessimistically.

"No fun at all," Peyton assured him.

"Well, I'd like to see the bandages, anyway."

Peyton displayed them.

"Would it come wight off if they untied the wags?"

"No, but they have to keep the

bones pressed against each other so they'll grow together."

"Oh, yes! Was your head bwoke, too?"

"Yes."

"Anything else?"

Peyton considered the question deeply.

"Yes, I rather think my heart's broken, too," he said with a laugh that was not quite a success.

"Did the doctor tie it up?"

"No, the doctor can't do anything for it, but it's all right, old man."

"You can call me Tommy, if you'd like. Tell me how you got bwoke."

He sat on the bed with his chubby hands clasped around his fat knees, and Peyton satisfied his thirst for gore by telling him a vivid tale of wreck and disaster based on the facts as they had come to him, but elaborated into a shilling shocker.

Tommy sighed contentedly.

"That's much better than Aunt Bettina's way. She just says: 'Oh, we ran into another train and the car tumbled over, and—oh, it was horrible, Tommy! Let's talk about something else.' Girls are funny, aren't they?"

"They are," agreed his listener.

"Aunt Bettina's nicer than most

girls, but she's funny, too. She don't like to see Towser kill wats. He's my terrier, Towser is. Simson says he's the finest watter for his size he ever saw in a stable. Aunt Betty cwies some, too. Girls always do. She was cwying this morning out in the summerhouse. Said she was n't, but her eyes were all wed and she sniffed and her hankychief was all soggy. She said she wished I'd stay little—'cause big men were howwid and weren't fit to be loved. I told her I wasn't going to be the howwid kind and I didn't want anybody to love me when I was big, anyway. It'd be a silly nuisance,

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would n't it? 'N' then she hugged me and said I didn't know what I was talking about—'n' that she was glad I had brown eyes—'n' then she hugged me again 'n' said she hoped I'd be tall and have bwoad shoulders, but that she hoped I'd never be howwid and insulting to any woman—'n' I told her I'd rather not be hugged any more. She isn't so bad gen'ally, but girls are funny, always wantin' to hug a fellow and kiss him. Are n't they?"

"I haven't noticed that," murmured Peyton. He was looking half puzzled, half radiant. It couldn't be possible but if it were—He put an arm around Thomas Franklin Morton, Junior, and gave him a hearty squeeze.

"Oh, I say," protested that young gentleman in deep disgust. "'Tain't fair for men to bother that way!"

"Tommy!" called a voice on the lawn below the window—a voice that made Peyton's pulses leap.

"Oh, Tommy, come, dear!"

"That's Aunt Bettina," explained her nephew, climbing reluctantly down from the bed. "We're going dwivin'. Wish I could stay here. I'll come again."

"Do," urged Peyton.

When she had said "Come" to him

he had not been slow in obeying. If she should say "Come, dear"——He buried his face in the pillow. Small chance of his ever hearing that call!

"What kept you, dear?" asked Bettina as she drove away with the scrap of boy at her side.

"I was up seeing the bwoke man." Tommy's r's were a trial to him, despite his six years.

"You were?"

"Yes, I liked him."

She made no comment and gave her attention to her horses' ears.

"Yes, he's nice, even if he is sick. Did you know his heart was bwoke, too?" Bettina looked sharply at the rosy face. It was innocence personified.

"Is it?" she asked with monumental indifference.

"Yes, his leg, 'n' his head, 'n' his heart. He said the doctor could n't do anything for his heart, but his head 'n' his leg are all tied up. D' you s'pose his heart will get well without doing anything for it? You're all sunburned, Aunt Bettina—just as red as can be."

"Would you like to drive, dear?"

The treat was so unexpected that it struck the boy dumb. Moreover, it created a diversion, during which Bet-

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tina's sunburn faded and she skilfully led the conversation to far fields.

"Morton," the invalid said, that evening, as Tom lounged beside his bed, "you said your sister was n't angry with me?"

Tom studied his watch-fob closely. "Why, yes."

"Then why doesn't she ever come up to speak to me?"

Tom had not the gift of imagination. He fumbled for an explanation and finally fell back on the truth.

"Well, you see, I guess maybe she is a bit sore about the thing. I didn't like to tell you for fear it would worry

you. It doesn't amount to anything, of course, but—you know women. I've tried to make Betty listen to reason, but she's as stubborn as a mule when she gets headed a certain way. Don't let it fret you, old man."

"No," said Peyton. "No, of course not."

There was a hint of satire in his tone, but Tom did not hear it.

Peyton had grown fond of his nurse. He had always been a beauty worshipper; had distinctly resented homeliness in a woman as he resented false notes in music. It had never occurred to him that there was pathos in such homeliness; but, lying there in bed, watching this woman of the angular figure, the swarthy skin, the prominent nose, the colourless, light eyes, the thin, straight hair, the keen mind, and the heart of gold, he told himself that it was all wrong. The handicap was unfair. He was guiltily ashamed of the pleasure he found in childish, inconsequent Molly's pink and white prettiness while that big-souled, unbeautiful woman sat and watched the butterfly creature with an uncomprehending wonderment.

This mood found expression in the emphasised courtesy and gentleness of

his manner toward the nurse, in flattering deference and appreciation. Once he ventured an outspoken compliment.

"Miss Kirby," he said as she stood smiling down upon him, "that smile of yours is a wonderful, heart-warming thing."

A flood of dull red surged up into her dark face and an embarrassment that was painful showed in her eyes and lips—an embarrassment so keen that it was contagious, and Peyton blushed, too, for sympathy.

"By Jove!" he said to himself as she busied herself with medicines on the other side of the room, "I believe it was the first personal compliment the woman ever had. She's used to being taken as an automatic healing machine and nothing else."

The nurse came toward him with a medicine glass in her hand. She was as matter-of-fact and cool as ever, and he met her mood with one to match it, but he paid her no more compliments save of a professional character.

If he could have seen that smile of hers as she sat watching him while he slept that same afternoon he would have found it a thing more wonderful than ever. The woman's heart was in

it, and there were tears in it, too. She leaned forward, brushed a stray lock back from his forehead, touching it gently, lingeringly, lovingly. Then she sat up straight in her chair, with a frown of impatience at some inner thought or feeling.

"I'm a fool!" she said to herself bitterly. "And the girl's another," she added after a moment's thought.

Peyton moved restlessly and opened his eyes.

"Do you want anything?" asked the nurse.

"Yes," he answered drowsily, 'twixt

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sleeping and waking. "Yes, but I can't have what I want."

Long after he was sleeping soundly again the nurse sat there thinking, a doubtful frown between her eyes. At last her lips straightened into a line of definite resolve, and she went silently out of the room.

Down on the veranda she found Bettina Morton, stretched out in a reclining chair, her lap full of June rose

"I couldn't get any farther," the girl said laughingly. "It's positively narcotic, this June sweetness."

Miss Kirby brushed words and laugh

aside. She wore her most severe professional air.

"Miss Morton," she said in a takingfor-granted tone, "will you go up and sit with my patient for a while? For some reason or other I'm played out this afternoon and I'll have to take an hour or two for rest." The admission hurt her professional pride, but her purpose was fixed and she lied convincingly.

Bettina pulled herself upright, consternation in her face.

"Why, Miss Kirby, I thought you left him alone now when you——"

"I don't like his symptoms to-day.

It wouldn't be right to leave him alone."

"Well-Hannah-"

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"I can't trust an ordinary servant with a patient in Mr. Peyton's condition. But, of course, if you---"

"Oh no," stammered Bettina. "If it's necessary, but I thought——"

Miss Kirby smiled apologetically. "No, we'll just let it go. I can stay with him. Probably I'll be all right—I've not taken my usual rest hours during this case and it's beginning to tell. Don't think of the thing again. I'm sorry I bothered you. I didn't realise that there was any personal reason why you—"

Bettina jumped to her feet with a vigorous protest. "Nonsense! I don't like a sick-room and I haven't much confidence in my own commonsense in case of an emergency. That's all. I'll be glad to relieve you."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't!" Bettina buried her tell-tale face for a moment in the huge bunch of roses.

"Thank you. It seems a shame to keep you indoors on such an afternoon. I'll go for a long walk and it will put me into better form. I know."

"But suppose anything goes wrong while you're away?" There was alarm

in the eyes that peered at the nurse over the pink rose petals.

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"No danger of that, if you give the medicines carefully. The directions are on the two bottles beside the bed. I won't be gone long."

She was swallowed by the shadowy hall and Bettina stood motionless for a moment, the serviceable flowers still hiding her eyes and lips. Then she raised her head defiantly and went slowly into the house, taking the roses with her.

To a bed-bound man, listening to the summer sound that floated in through the window and fretting against his



The sunshine was in her hair; the limpid shadows of sun-warmed waters were in her eyes

helplessness and confinement, came a vision of June, all in cloudlike white with the blue of the sky gleaming here and there among the whiteness. The sunshine was in her hair; the limpid shadows of sun-warmed waters were in her eyes; the balm and blossoming were in her cheeks and lips; her arms were full of fragrant, open-hearted roses. She stood, framed in the white doorway, and the man's eyes enfolded her hungrily, but with a tinge of awe in their glad adoration. She was so beautiful, so radiantly beautiful, this June Lady! There were no fit words of greeting for her.

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She smiled uncertainly, and it was as if the whole room had sprung into bloom; but still the man lay mute. A frown followed the smile quickly. Bettina had not meant to be friendly, but the thin, white face and the glad eyes were disarming, and she had to remind herself firmly that the sick man had offended her beyond hope of pardon. If he would only say something, instead of staring at her in such absurd fashion! She might disagree with anything he could say, but it was manifestly impossible to snub him with an "I don t agree with you at all" when his eloquence remained unspoken. Then, too,

she didn't altogether disagree with him. She had looked in the hall mirror on her way to the sick room.

The silence hung heavily in the room, and the June Lady cast about desperately for haughty and nonchalant words with which to shatter it.

"How do you do?" she asked at last. The utterance was inadequate, and, as a sense of its inadequacy was borne in upon her, she blushed slowly, rosily.

"I'm much better, thank you," Peyton answered solemnly in the hushed voice appropriate to converse with divinity.

The conversation fell heavily into the gulf of silence. Bettina grasped futilely at her usual serene self-poise and attempted to fill the conversational gap with stage business. The hungry eyes followed her as she moved across the room, sat down by the window and put a few of her roses into the slender vase that stood on the low, broad sill. When she looked up and met the gaze she once more took refuge in platitudes.

"You've been very ill."

"So they tell me."

"The nurse has gone for a walk. She asked me to sit here while she is away."

"It is too bad, to trouble you."

"Oh, it's no trouble! She needs the rest."

With a thrill of relief, Betty realised that the disclaimer was keyed to an airy indifference, but she still lacked inspiration. As she debated her next move, the man, with true masculine disregard for subtle tactics, plunged straight into the heart of things.

"You are angry with me," he said. Histoneimplied a dire calamity and sank to a gloomier note as he added: "I don't blame you. It was abominable."

"It certainly was," agreed the young woman frigidly.

"But it was n't all my fault," he urged, and then, seeing resentment in her face, hurried on: "Oh, no, of course I don't mean that you were all to blame, but circumstances were against me. I never intended to wallow in guilt. Really I didn't. Of course, I ought to have stopped the thing right at the start, but I was taken by surprise, and —and—well——" he stammered to a dead halt, but his eyes spoke volumes concerning the temptation that had laid him low.

"Probably the women you have known wouldn't consider such an ungentlemanly proceeding an insult." The icy voice fairly crisped the rose petals in Bettina's lap. A faint flush crept into the invalid's pale cheeks.

"My mother was a gentlewoman, Miss Morton."

Bettina's own cheeks were aflame now. It was most exasperating to be made to feel waspish and exceeding small—by a creature who had sinned as this one had.

"We'll not talk about the thing, if you please." Her tone was one of lofty finality. "There's no chance that we might agree, and you aren't strong enough to stand any excitement. Since we are unfortunately obliged to be

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together, it will be better to ignore the unpleasantness of the situation as completely as possible. Would you like me to read to you?"

"There isn't any reason why you should do penance by staying in a sick-room."

"The nurse thinks differently."

"You can imagine how enjoyable it is for me to be thrown upon your charity as I have been."

"Perhaps you don't care for reading."

"Your brother has kindly tried to make the situation endurable."

"Are you fond of poetry?"

He gave it up. Perhaps it was the

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dimple in her left cheek—a dimple that hinted at inward relenting; perhaps it was the twinkle in her eyes; perhaps it was the careful impertinence of her tone, an impertinence too elaborate to be taken seriously. Something there was that lightened Peyton's mood, and he laughed helplessly.

"I am a worm in the dust, a pariah, a dog of an outcast! There is no good in me. I have apologised with my forehead in the mire and my heart in tears. There's nothing more I can do—and I'm very fond of poetry, particularly during the months of May and June."

The dimple deepened.

"You show a beautiful spirit of humility and resignation—but it isn't so bad as it seems. I really read poetry very well."

She did—and she read for an hour, while Peyton lay quiet, looking from under half-closed eyelids at the bars of sunlight stealing through the blinds and brightening the hair they touched to burnished gold—at the wilful, piquant profile, clear cut against the light—at the soft curves of throat and chin and wrist—at the exquisite daintiness and graciousness of her.

Just what she read in that hour he will never know. There was melody in

it, but whether the melody was born of the reader's voice or of the poet's rhythm the listener didn't even attempt to decide. It was enough to lie still and look at her. If she had been repeating the alphabet, he would still have been quite content.

Dark bluebells drenched with summer dews, the cuckoo's cry, dreaming garden trees, full moon and white evening star—all the poet's imagery floated idly through his brain and was absorbed in the one beauty of which he was keenly conscious. Poetry was but handmaid to the June Lady, a gracious accompaniment to her melody.

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He came out of his trance with a start as Betty softly closed the book.

"Yet there are folk who say Matthew Arnold was no poet!" she said with high disdain.

"Imbeciles," murmured Peyton.

Miss Kirby, coming into the room, glanced at her patient, transferred the look to Miss Morton, and then lifted bottle and spoon from the table.

"Just time for your medicine again," she announced.

Bettina's face took on an expression of abject guilt, and she cast one pleading glance at Peyton. He welcomed it with enthusiasm. What were four forgotten doses of medicine compared with the fellowship that look established? The rack could not have wrung from him an admission that the visiting nurse had altogether neglected to give him his medicine, and that he had been blissfully unconscious of such mundane nothings.

But Miss Kirby, gauging the amount of liquid in the bottle allowed a ghost of a smile to flit over her face. It passed unobserved. Miss Kirby's smiles, though pleasant things, were not fascinating phenomena made conspicuous by dimples.

"I hope I haven't tired your patient,

nurse," said Bettina, gathering up her flowers and her book, and rising.

"Oh, no, indeed!" protested the patient politely.

Miss Kirby looked at him with critical eyes.

"He seems to be all right. I'm greatly obliged to you, Miss Morton. An hour's rest each day will soon straighten me out."

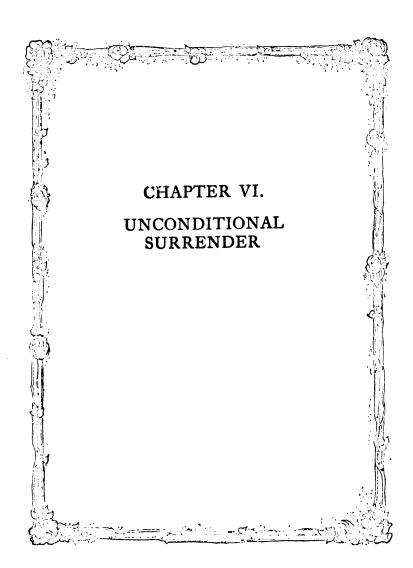
"An hour each day!"

A great joy illumined Peyton's face, but Bettina's expression was profoundly noncommittal.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Peyton."
She moved toward the door, and the

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sunlight faded with her, but in the doorway she turned and smiled. The room was in shadow, but Peyton's heart sunned itself in the afterglow.



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CHAPTER VI.

MISS KIRBY was a woman of her word and she would have her bond. One hour of every day shedevoted to rest, with a conscientiousness truly admirable, and for one hour every day Bettina Morton sat in the sick-room and tried to be consistently angry with a man so many fathoms deep in love that any passing daw might have made merry with the heart recklessly worn upon a pajama sleeve.

The truce of the sick-room was kept.

Peyton made no more pleas or apoiogies; Bettina ignored the subject of the invalid's transgressions. Only the wall of reserve built up between the two reminded the judge of her office and the sinner of his sin. There were times when it seemed to Peyton that vaulting the wall would be a simple matter, if he but had the hardihoodtimes when, through the chinks, he caught a glimpse of a delectable land and yearned toward it; but it meant so much to him to be sure of his dear Lady Disdain for at least one hour out of every twenty-four! She might stay away altogether if he should disturb the

armed neutrality. A fellow might risk putting his lady-love to flight when he could follow, but, with one leg in splints and the other leg too groggy for service, a waiting policy was not only wise but imperative.

Peyton rebelled hotly against his physical helplessness, yet, in his moments of wisdom, knew that in it lay his vantage-ground. Even an angry goddess cannot well annihilate a mortal at whom a freight train has had the first chance; even the most unreasonable of women must show some consideration for a man whose temperature is liable to sudden upward flights to-

ward the danger line, and then—though this Peyton, being mere man, could not be expected to understand—the mother that lies deep in the soul of every woman yearns pityingly over helplessness, be it in man or child.

At first Thomas Franklin Morton, Junior, showed a strong inclination toward sharing his aunt's sick-room vigil during that daily afternoon hour. Molly, too, decided that it would be a kindness to her sister-in-law to lighten her unwelcome task by helping her to entertain the invalid; but Miss Kirby, still an autocrat from whose verdict there was no appeal, promptly decreed

that all visits must be paid during the morning hours.

"But there's Bettina," protested Mrs. Morton.

"Miss Morton is filling my place in my absence," said the nurse gravely; and Miss Morton, unattended by members of her fond family, continued to fill the place, after a fashion, without in the least appreciating the fact that she was being administered to the invalid upon the same principal as were his medicine and his gruel, only with less frequency and greater effectiveness.

The days slipped by and June, creep-

ing in through open windows, worked her spells round a man and a maid. But the maid did not confess even to herself that her anger had evaporated, and the man did not dare hope that the dreams he dreamed might come true. So the impossible situation remained possible, and Miss Kirby, whose rôle of dea ex machina fitted her but indifferently well, and whose preference was always for prompt and drastic measures, grew impatient with the foolish young things toward whom she had played special providence.

June, too, grew weary of the dallying. She was used to quicker results when she played a part in love affairs, and she resented the leisurely progress of this sick-room romance.

"If I had those two children out in the open, I'd make short work of their pretences and misunderstandings," she said impatiently—and, by way of showing her disapproval, she sent along a most spectacular thunderstorm in the midst of a reading from Browning conducted by a young woman who did n't know what she was reading for the edification of a young man who did n't care what she was reading. Bettina was afraid of thunder and lightning—childishly, pitifully afraid—

and the first crash drove her from her seat by the window to the middle of the room. A vivid flash of lightning found her standing there, and, with a little scream, she retreated still farther. The next flash, bursting into the room like a living thing, was too much for her pride and, dropping on her knees beside the bed, she cowered there, her face hidden in the pillow, her fingers in her ears.

Peyton lay quite still, afraid to move lest she should go. Her nearness set his pulses throbbing; her fear of the storm robbed him of his fear of her, restored the balance of the sexes. She was such a child, such a little tender thing, to be loved, comforted, protected! Slowly, gently his hand went out to find hers. If she was conscious of his boldness she made no sign.

"Bettina," he whispered softly.

A deafening peal of thunder drowned the whisper. Had she heard? "I-i-isn't it awful?"

The voice smothered in the pillow sounded very small and tremulous.

Awful? Peyton was finding it heavenly! At the next thunder crash his arm slipped around her and held her close. She made no effort to escape. If it had not seemed too good to be

true, Peyton would have believed she snuggled closer like a frightened child. She was trembling, and a little sob reached his ears.

"Bettina," he whispered once more, "Bettina, darling, don't be afraid! The storm won't hurt you, little girl. It's almost over."

The thunder rumbled away in the distance, the lightning grew weak and wavering, and Bettina, taking her face out of the pillow, found it close to another face full of passionate entreaty.

She drew back quickly, grown up once more, now that the fear was past,

but there were tears in her eyes and a quiver in her voice.

"I'm so d-d-dreadfully af-fraid of thunder!" she stammered, springing to her feet.

"Bettina," the man said insistently, "Bettina, have you forgiven me?"

"I'll never forgive you!" flashed a very erect and haughty young woman. "You had no right to do it. You knew I was only frightened!"

The original crime had been blotted from the calendar by a later offence; and now, as before, the unreasonable young woman refused to admit extenuating circumstances or undue

provocation as argument in the defendant's favour.

"But, Bettina-"

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"Only my intimate friends call me that. It's time for your medicine, Mr. Peyton!"

Her face was hot, her hand trembling, as she poured out a tablespoonful of the liquid, but she was impressively stern. He took the dose obediently, but returned stubbornly to the charge.

"Don't you care at all, little girl? You know how I love you. You must have seen it. You're the heart of me, dear. I knew the moment my eyes saw you that you were the only woman

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in the world for me. Why, that's why I couldn't say 'No' when you told me to go with you——"

He had made a dire mistake. For the moment Bettina had forgotten her early grievance. Now she remembered it.

"If I were you I would say nothing about that episode," she said curtly. "You would probably have done the same thing with any pretty girl. Miss Kirby ought to be here by this time. I have an engagement for four."

He made no response, and, turning toward him, she saw that his face was drawn and livid, his eyes closed.

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"What is it?" she asked, dropping her haughtiness incontinently. "What is it? Are you worse?"

Peyton spoke with an effort. Great drops of sweat were standing on his forehead, his lips were blue.

"Can you find Miss Kirby?" he asked between set teeth. "I'm suffering infernally."

Bettina stood for an instant hesitating; then ran toward the door. She was helpless, but Miss Kirby would know what to do.

The nurse, strolling across the lawn, saw the girl coming, and one look at the white, scared face sent her running toward the sick-room even before a word was said.

"What is it?" she asked briefly of the girl beside her.

"I don't know. It came suddenly. He's suffering so horribly."

They entered the room together and the nurse went swiftly to the bedside, felt Peyton's pulse, asked him a few low questions, then turned to the little table upon which the medicine stood.

"You were very careful with the medicine, Miss Morton?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Kirby," said bigeyed, white-faced Bettina.

"You know the doctor warned us to

give no more than the ten drops when he changed it yesterday. You didn't give more?"

The white face grew whiter still, the pupils of the big eyes dilated with fright, the girl struggled to find her voice.

"Oh, Miss Kirby, I did, I did! I'd forgotten the medicine was changed, and I was excited about something, and I gave him the dose I'd been used to giving——"

"Not a tablespoonful?"

"Yes."

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"Telephone for the doctor! Bring up a kettle of boiling water—and then go away!" There was anger, contempt, disgust in the nurse's tone. She had no charity for mistakes like this.

"Is it very bad?" asked the girl with white lips.

The man on the bed, half unconscious, heard her voice.

"Don't be frightened, little girl," he said weakly. "Don't be frightened, little—— "His voice trailed off into a groan.

"Is it very bad?" Bettina repeated with a choked voice.

"Bad?—I'm afraid you've killed him!" Miss Kirby answered. There was a hurt in her heart that made her cruel.

Doctor Dawson came quickly, and, behind closed doors, he and the nurse fought a second fight with death for Willoughby Peyton's life, while in a room on the floor below a girl lay face downward on a couch, trying to pray, but only moaning over and over again between racking sobs:

"O God, don't let him die—don't let him die!"

She did not hear Miss Kirby's rap at the door a half-hour later, but she answered the second summons, and seeing the look on the girl's face the nurse spoke hastily:

"It's all right, Miss Morton. He's

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asking for you, and the doctor says you'd better go."

The two women climbed the stairs together, but at the door of Peyton's room Miss Kirby turned away.

"He does n't want me." Her homely face looked grim and old, her voice held a weary note.

Bettina put her arms around the tall, gaunt woman.

"You've saved him for me," she said with a swift impulsiveness, unconscious of the irony in the simple words. "How can I ever make you understand how I love you for it?"

The nurse submitted to the embrace

with the responsiveness of a granite obelisk.

"I didn't do it for you," she answered drily. "Saving life is my business."

Peyton heard them at the door, but he did not open his eyes. A soft step across the room. Still he put off the moment when he would look into her face—and know.

"Billy," said a small, humble voice close to his ear—"Billy, it isn't thundering now, but—I'm frightened."

His arms went around her.

THE END

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